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Learning Regions

The Challenge of Globalization in Higher Education

In one of his recent studies Osmo Kivinen suggests that the dual system of the European higher education works according to the principle of “different but equal” (Kivinen, Nurmi 2009). It may be a critic to the Bologna Process in which the participating governments advise (push) their national higher education system to become unified systems with three cycles. Kivinen’s results challenge the globalization in the higher education of Europe (the ‘European Higher Education Area’)

Higher education institutions are competing today for more students, better labor market feedbacks, larger markets for their services and higher world rankings. All this is said to be an effect of globalization. Globalization in higher education may be caused, among other factors, by the neoliberal wave of economic and social policies in the 1980s and 1990s. This neoliberal philosophy has the ‘market’ as the central tool in economic and social development, since the free market gives new impetus to competitors. The actors of the market may be free if the markets are big, if local markets can be connected to each other, and the products and services can flow unlimited. In this sense, institutions of higher education are also actors in a market which has to be more and more global. The globalization of the higher education ‘market’ may lead to the global exchange of knowledge and services, and competition between institutions may result in the selection of the best.

At the beginning of the 2000s, however, a new idea appeared. It is called the 'learning region'. As opposed to the 'market', the 'learning region' calls upon social cooperation as the main tool for economic and social development. Social networks can be organized locally (regionally) rather than at the global level. As opposed to 'global', the idea of the 'learning regions' stresses the importance of the 'local' (regional).

Is this idea relevant in the realm of higher education? Is the 'learning region' idea a possible alternative to the global trends of marketization and globalization? The present study tries to answer this question. First, the idea of 'learning region' is presented as an alternative to market-based socio-economic development. Second, a new governance is proposed for the 'learning region' idea. And third, the old concept of comprehensive higher education is renewed as a factor that may contribute to the emergence of the learning regions by returning institutions to their real geographical and social environments.

'Learning Region': The Challenge of Market-based Development

The traditional approach of socio-economic development stresses the importance of market forces and competition. If the markets are growing and their actors are free and the competition among them may select the best actors of the market. 'Learning region' is an idea in which the socio-economic development lies on the local / regional actors and their cooperation (social networks) rather than on the market and its competitors.

The idea of the 'learning region' was spreading in the relevant English and German literature as early as the first half of the 1990s (see Illeris, Jakobsen 1990; OECD 1993; Abich 1994; Lernende Regions 1994). There are two things that these studies make clear. One is the view that economic development can (should) be based on social networks rather than the market. The other is the impact of socio-economic networks on regional development, especially the impact of innovation networks.

The most known author (and activist) of the idea of 'learning regions' is Richard Florida (1995) This is how he summarises his understanding of the 'learning regions':

"Regions are becoming focal points for knowledge creation and learning in the new age of global, knowledge-intensive capitalism, as they in effect become *learning regions*. These learning regions function as collectors and repositories of knowledge and ideas, and provide the underlying environment or infrastructure which facilitates the flow of knowledge, ideas and learning. In fact, despite continued predictions of the end of geography, regions are becoming more important modes of economic and technological organization on a global scale" (Florida 1995: 527).

There are two dominant elements in Florida's study and in the literature he cites (e.g. Ohmae 1993; Regional Advantage 1994). One is the growing role of regions and regional approaches in the process of globalisation; the other is an alternative strategy of economic development. Florida focuses on the transformation of enterprises rather than the changing of market regulation. In Hassink's view "a learning region can be defined as a regional innovation strategy in which a broad set of innovation-related regional actors... are strongly, but flexibly connected with each other..." (Hassink 2004, see also CERI 2000).

Every enterprise is a social organisation. Its production and all related learning are social activities. So they cannot be understood outside a regional context. Globalized enterprises experience the hidden knowledges and learning behaviors embedded in local / regional culture, Hudson (1999) says.

Morgan (1997) aimed at linking two concepts and approaches: economic geography and innovation studies. His purpose was to work out a regional strategy on the basis of the results of innovation studies and thereby contribute to EU regional development plans. For his endeavour he applied the idea of 'learning region'. He interpreted it as a territorial network of innovations, which may necessitate new developmental strategies. By case studies he also illustrated the nature of those networks of innovation.

The shift from the market forces to the social cooperation forces – from global to local / regional -- does not need a precise definition of learning regions. A formal definition would just hinder the flexibility of the necessary developmental actions. Those who use the concept as a slogan for alternative developmental strategies do not try to clarify it. In Boekema's (2000) opinion there is no need for definitions. Let us think of learning regions as an idea that does not have to be defined. According to an OECD document (OECD 2001: 23, cited by Hassink 2004) a learning region „constitutes a *model* towards which actual regions need to progress in order to respond most effectively to the challenges posed by the ongoing transition to a learning economy...”

The above mentioned approaches linked the regional development with the study of innovation, and introduced the concept of ‘learning regions’. They searched for an alternative to the view that enterprises are actors on the market solely. In regional approaches the dominant factor of economic development is the social environment of enterprises. As a result, a new idea of economic and social development was evolving where the community, its government and its regional policies regain their key role.

‘Learning Region’: The Challenge of Bureaucratic Coordination

Governments in the traditional (neo-liberal) view has to have only minimal role in the developmental process. They should not interfere in the market processes; rather, they has to be the guards of fairplays. The idea of the ‘learning region’ involves a new role of the governments. This means decentralisation at the regional level, coordination of specialized public administration at that level, as well as an active local society which is taking part of the bottom-up decision making processes.

According to Morgan (2008: 499) “Throughout the world we see a greater emphasis on regional and local levels of governance and the provision of services, including those of education and training 'close to the ground'... it is at the level of urban communities and economic regions that individuals tend more to establish a local identity and rootedness.”

There is a need for a different kind of public administration to coordinate special administrative departments at the local level. Lukesch and Payer (2009) stress that the work of local-regional 'development agencies' gradually shifts towards local-regional administrative tasks. The national government intervenes from outside (above) by providing the conditions for development only. Local / regional public policy is becoming the sum of special policies such as policy of education, health care, transportation etc.

Path-dependency, however, makes it difficult for the public employees to come up with new, alternative, innovative and creative answers to developmental challenges. Therefore, the key issue is learning within the administration (see Geenhuizen and Nijkamp 2002).

'Learning regions' require local governments that are capable of solving local problems locally, learning from their solutions and establishing a new kind of administration on the basis of their learning. It is not only learning people and organisations that are necessary for the raise of 'learning regions'. A local / regional government is also necessary, which may coordinates all learning parties in order to solve local problems. This is how Lukesch and Payer (2009: 12) define the essence of this new way of governance: "...regional governance means that regional actors (representatives of interest groups, business, unions and other organisations) organise themselves through negotiation and networking, in addition and in constant collaboration with governmental institutions, specifically territorial authorities at local, regional, national (and European) level."

Or as the participants of a symposium on learning regions (Thessaloniki, 15-16 March 2001) stated: "...development is a collective process to produce an outcome... in which top-down and bottom-up developments form a dialectic. ...the focus is on achieving social and economic objectives in an integrated manner. Regional learning initiatives entail empowering local communities through the involvement of people from different interest groups..." (European Centre 2003: 3).

The actors of a 'learning region' recognise challenges together and search for answers together because of common learning. Good governance is guaranteed by common learning. Learning - not in the sense of being taught by somebody from outside but in the sense of an inner urge to learn - is a prerequisite for the formation of a 'learning region'. Learning in this sense, however, has its own limits. The 'governance by learning' idea is based on cooperation rather than on conflicts. As Hudson (1999) argues, the real question is not common learning, rather this: who learns what and from whom?

Critical social theorists (like Hudson 1999) are sceptical towards statements like 'harmony of interests' and 'agreement in developmental goals'. According to their view decision-making are not the result of a 'harmony of interests' rather the outcome of fights among various interests and their representatives. To them, the governance of a 'learning region' does not mean smooth cooperation but hard struggle of local / regional interest groups.

So we should expect more of the new governance than just better cooperation and reasonable development. What the idea of a new governance should also incorporate is the local /regional initiative--as opposed to central (and many times also bureaucratic) administration. But have civil societies any chance of taking the initiative? Is this new type of governance an idea or a real alternative to the centrally controlled (and so many times bureaucratic) decision making?

Regional Institution: The Challenge of a World Class University?

The 'World Class University'—or various other terms with the same meaning—is the outcome of globalization; but not only this. It is a result of a specific way of policy making in higher education that is usually called 'neoliberal'. As it is proposed above, terms like 'world-class institution', 'quality education', 'research university' and the like are the results of competition and rivalry among HE institutions in a globalized market of 'knowledge production and distribution' (Machlup 1962). If we take the 'learning region' idea as an alternative way of socio-economic

development and an alternative to bureaucratic control, a new question arises. Is there any alternative to the present policy of higher education with its worldwide competition for higher positions on the ranking lists, globalized rivalry for resources and growing embeddedness in the world economy? Or, to put it another way, can an institution opt out of these globalization trends while retaining its social functions? The answer may be found in the idea of the 'regional institution'.

The idea of the 'regional university' ('regional college', community / city college or institution) dates back to the turn of the 1970s. (For a good review of the relevant literature of that time see Cohen 1992, Cunningham 1996). The idea of the English 'Polytechnic' or the German 'Gesamthochschule' (comprehensive higher education institution) at that time involved various socio-economic as well as cultural and political factors in Europe (most of all Europe's northwestern part). The factors embedded in the idea of the comprehensive higher education institution were these: (a) to support the social mobility of students from lower-status social groups by opening to them access to higher education; (b) to increasing equality in education (especially in higher education) by locating institutions closer to students in terms of geography (comprehensive higher education in the neighborhood); (c) to help the democratization process (in the sense of Martin Trow [1974]) by changing higher education curricula as well as by guiding students to employment and life careers; (d) to contribute to the territorial development of stagnating or marginalized regions by establishing centers of higher education, vocational training as well as public culture (Fletcher 1985)

The idea of comprehensive higher education in Europe had many roots in the history of education. (See Cohen 1996, Davies 1992) The American 'community college' was probably its closest forerunner. The community college was a different model with different aims and different backgrounds. Yet, the European theorists of comprehensive higher education stressed the ties rather than the differences between the American and the European model.

Another forerunner was adult education, especially as it was organized in northern Europe as well as in Germany ('people's high schools' regularly

translated in various European languages as ‘people’s colleges’). This model of organized adult education was also rooted in the 19th century as a kind of liberal adult education (combined sometimes with VAT). Both this model and the American community college—together with various kinds of adult education throughout Europe—were linked with the cultural and political enlightenment of the working class and were sometimes even connected with their social and political movements.

The comprehensive higher education movement—if we may call it so—was influenced by the new wave of massification in higher education that started in the mid- 1960s in Europe (between 1960—65 in most of the countries). The traditional university system at that time was not prepared for mass higher education; an expansion in the higher education network was needed according to the education policy makers and was supported by governments (mostly by social democratic ones).

Comprehensive higher education was promising idea especially for stagnating regions. Those regions and their political and economic leaders hoped that with higher education they could also take part in the economic development of their countries. All in all, the new type of higher education served various socio-economic as well as political and cultural aims; therefore it unified the efforts of various local and regional interest groups. So the effort of ‘regionalizing’ the higher education network emerged as an educational and political movement in the 1970s. (Merisotis, O’Brian 1998, Osborne, Molyneux 1981).

We call the establishment of comprehensive higher education (in stagnating European regions) a movement because it was initiated not only from above, but also on the spot. That is, local and regional authorities as well as their economic and cultural partners showed their new demands for higher education both as a service (a place to learn) and as an institution (a cultural and political centre which might support the urbanization of stagnating territories called ‘urban centers of education and culture’). The creation of such centers, supporting social efforts as well as regional development, was the main idea behind the comprehensive education movement.

The expansion process reached the eastern part of Europe during the 1970s / 1980s in the form of the upgrading of institutions of secondary education, mostly technical and vocational training type schools. The main idea of the movement, however, was blocked by the political (party) authorities and by the bureaucracy of economic (social) planning. The dynamics of higher education expansions were stopped in those countries as the relevant statistics of higher education in Eastern Europe show. A new dynamic emerged immediately after the political changes of the early 1990s when the old political controls evaporated and the new controlling forces (democratic states and their new public administrations) were not organized yet.

In the political vacuum created by the political transition, two dynamics became visible. The leading one was the struggle for the new national higher education systems (new nation states emerged like Slovakia, Ukraine, the post-Yugoslav republics and the so-called Baltic republics). These newly established systems ten years later stepped into the 'European higher education area' and are now competing for higher positions in world university rankings. (This is a contradiction in itself. They were established and developed throughout their histories as national institutions. Their mission has always been to serve their nations and maintain their identities rather than to recruit students from the neighboring countries by boosting their position in league tables—as if nation states would create a 'common market' where national universities with their national languages and cultures could compete for students of rival national cultures.)

The other dynamic which became visible in the higher education arena during the transition was the struggle for individual freedom and community rights as opposed to the former political and bureaucratic control. These rights had included the right to establish new community (local, regional) institutions which would serve local / regional societies rather than the administrative regulations. Self-governance and local decision making were also massive forces during the political transition in Central and Eastern Europe.

A study focusing on higher education among national (ethnic) minorities shed light on that process. In the course of the political transition the mushrooming of civil initiatives such as local 'community colleges' began (see the website of the TERD Project). They were the outcomes of various efforts of competing interest groups, which from time to time could make compromises if a successful 'change agent' took over the leadership. Following the life cycles of 18 'new-born' institutions for a period of ten years (not all of those being in the sample throughout our investigation), we noticed some typical features. These are as follow:

(a) Grassroots institutions may come into existence in a given time only (we called this time slot in history the *kairos*, using an ancient Greek concept). This historical time slot was everywhere—behind the Iron Curtain as well as in other parts of Europe—the turn of the 1990s. There was no chance to establish grassroots institutions in the region before those years. After the period (the *kairos*) it proved to be very complicated again. The given time slot was therefore existential.

(b) It was also a must for these institutions to have their 'change agent'. Every change agent has his / her own career in which the establishing of a higher education institution proved to be crucial. Most of the founders became political figures later on. But in the given time slot their most important aim was to create an institution.

(c) The grassroots institutions needed the local (regional) social environment. Their founders could not found them without the support of the local elite. Interestingly (we were in Central and Eastern Europe) the churches were almost always among the major supporters (rather than economic, agricultural or cultural actors). The local elite *plus* the change agent in the given time slot were together able to establish a grassroots institution.

The national universities face the dilemma of globalization and worldwide competition among institutions of higher education. They are pushed into a rivalry where institutions of small and medium-size European nations have no real chance to win. They have been established not as actors in a worldwide educational market, but as symbols of different national

identities. The grassroots institutions face a different dilemma. When joining the European Union their national governments try to control them from above. The means for this new control is the Bologna Process. If the grassroots institutions step into the Bologna Process—as required by their state authorities—they would be accredited as elements of their relevant national systems. In this way they would gain government accreditation (and financial support)—however they would lose their local / regional contacts. If they refuse to join the Bologna Process, controlled by their governments, they may save their local / regional ties, but would fail to receive accreditation. They may remain in their local settings without the right to become the institute of higher learning of the given community. (For a comparative study of the Bologna Process in Central Europe see Kozma, Rébay eds 2008)

Is there any way out of this catch? The idea of the ‘learning region’ may be a source of assistance both to the national universities pushed into the global market and to the community institutions facing marginalization.

As shown above, the idea of the ‘learning region’ is an alternative form of socio-economic development. Not the global market, but the local social network is the force for socio-economic development. Higher education institutions may opt out of an unrealistic competition in an invisible ‘global market’ by serving their regional environment and becoming (at least partly) ‘regional universities’. Grassroots institutions, on the other hand, may become the focal point of the social networks that are needed regionally as alternatives to the globalized market. Higher education may receive a new mission: to create a hub—or several hubs—for developing their community as a ‘learning region’.

Learning regions, as we have seen, emerge if the local / regional forces of innovation and creativity are actively linked to each other. Networking, however, is not a spontaneous development. It has to be initiated by local forces in a bottom-up manner. The local university is one organization that may take the lead in regional networking. Comprehensive higher education in the 1960s and 1970s may have supported stagnating and marginalized regions. In contrast, the regional universities of today may speed up the regional / local innovation processes. The task is not to perpetuate the local

/ regional identity, but to import new ideas from the outside and to export local innovations. So the regional university may serve learning regions not only by social networking (an inside service) but also by making contacts with the larger context (an outside service).

The idea of the 'learning region' covers also a new model of administration, decision-making and control. In this new model of governance public administration is locally (regionally) coordinated, while the decision making processes have grassroots impetus on behalf of the local society. It is important therefore that the regional higher education be liberated from central bureaucratic decision making, even though it may be controlled by local / regional authorities. Educational administration is decentralized in many EU member states today. However, self-governance is different from decentralization in the sense that the self-governed entity has the right to decide as long as its decision does not harm the regulations of the greater political entity (e.g. the state). The governance of the 'learning region' should not be self-regulated just because of pure theory but because self-regulation in decision making may lead to organizational learning (how to make better decisions next time). Self-regulation is the guarantee for learning by decision making in the idea of a 'learning region',

It is all the more true for the higher education institutions of the region. The major drive of their development is organizational learning rather than market competition. Thus the regional university may be not only a place of higher education and study, fostering social networks and producing new knowledge (applied research). It should also be a learning organization itself, one that is "not only able to solve immediate problems but also to raise their capacity of problem solving" (Lukesch, Prayer 2009:15).

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The massification of higher education—which is still going on throughout the world (Shofer, Meyer 2005)—will end in a situation where higher education becomes an element of the education system. The idea that globalized higher education institutions competing with each other in a

worldwide market is more a reflection of the 20th century than a forecast of the future. As they lose their independence from the respective (national) systems of education, institutions of higher education will lose their ability to compete for a world ranking and will turn to their narrower catchment areas. Market forces and competition will not be the major drives leading universities out of their social and cultural contexts. Instead, they will step by step be integrated into their socio-economic environments. This happened to secondary schools as they moved from being elite institutions to mass institutions; it will probably happen to higher education institutions too.

All these changes may happen in one of two scenarios. Under the first scenario, the integration of the universities into their respective systems of education may proceed under government control. If this happens, the controls would probably be bureaucratic. That is, the universities would lose their relative autonomy and independence while they gain secure financial support and regulation. They become (at least in Europe) institutions serving the public interest, controlled by government offices and financed and accounted for by the central budget. This is the likely course, though not too fascinating.

The second scenario may be more attractive. In the course of their integration the universities would not only be an element of their respective education system but also an element—even a strong one—of their local / regional society. If this happens, there would be a benefit both for the universities and for the regions themselves. The idea of the ‘learning region’ holds this promise.

Osmo Kivinen’s research results—referred at the introduction of this study--showed that the institutions of the dual systems in Europe may work as if they would be ‘different, yet equal’. If our suggested second scenario would come true, ‘regional’ as well as ‘national’ universities may also work according to the principle Osmo Kivinen mentions.

Note

Thanks to my close colleague *Gabor Erdei* at the University of Debrecen for turning my attention to the idea of the 'learning region'. That the idea of the 'learning region' might challenge the globalisation process in higher education emerged in a symposium on Equity in Higher Education (University of Ljubljana, 23-24 November 2010). Here I discussed relevant issues with (among others) *Roger Dale*, *Voldemar Tomusk* and *Pavel Zgaga* for which I express my thanks.

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